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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 001543

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: MFA CABINET ASSESSES THE EGYPTIAN-SYRIAN
RELATIONSHIP

REF: CAIRO 1085

Classified By: Minister-Counselor William R. Stewart

Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Egyptian MFA Cabinet advisors told us in separate meetings July 14-20 that the GOE remains frustrated with Syria, with no plans for a high-level bilateral meeting on the horizon. Although there had been talk of a Mubarak-Assad meeting at the Paris summit of European and Mediterranean leaders (July 12-13), it failed to materialize due to lack of interest from both sides. Our MFA contacts assess that Syria is getting too much credit from the West for political progress in Lebanon and are worried about Egypt's position. End summary.

¶2. (C) MFA Cabinet Advisor for Syria-Lebanon Mahmoud Afifi told us July 20 that a "climate of frustration" surrounds the Egyptian-Syrian relationship. (Note: Afifi recently assumed his new duties after serving for a year as the MFA Cabinet Advisor for Iran. End note.) During the recent EU-Med Paris summit, Afifi said there had been preliminary plans for a meeting with the Syrians, perhaps as part of a larger meeting with the Qatars and French, but in the end there was not enough "stamina" for it from the Egyptian delegation. The Syrians, likewise, were not seriously interested, according to Afifi.

¶3. (C) Afifi said that the main reason for Egyptian disinterest was a continuing lack of positive signals that the Syrians would seriously discuss key issues such as Lebanon, and Palestinian groups (e.g. Hamas) currently harbored in Damascus. Afifi said that the Egyptians believe they have worked hard to soften Saudi Arabia's hard stance toward Syria, but that the SARG neither acknowledges this effort nor intends to reciprocate the good will.

¶4. (C) Afifi said that the bilateral bitterness appears to have leaked into the economic and trade sphere. Historically, the Syrians have provided good access for Egyptian products to Syrian markets. But Afifi reported there were approximately 250 Egyptian containers currently held up in Syrians ports. There are ostensible administrative reasons for these delays, but Afifi said it appears that the SARG is systemically slowing down entry of Egyptian goods. The Egyptians will not reciprocate, Afifi said, because the GOE does not want to create an unnecessary dispute with Syria. It does, however, appear as evidence to Afifi of Syrian antagonistic behavior amidst a deteriorating relationship.. (Note: In a recent meeting with EgyptAir, Security Director Essam El Din claimed that "tension in the bilateral relationship" was beginning to have a negative impact the airline's relationship with airport and civil aviation officials in Damascus. Ref B. End note.)

¶5. (S) On July 14, outgoing Cabinet Advisor for Syria-Lebanon Nazih Neggary told us that he was worried about the potential for Egypt to end up "isolated" by virtue of Western rapprochement with Syria. If the West and Syria move closer

together, Neggary wondered why should Egypt marginalize itself by taking a hard line toward the SARG. Neggary told us that he had recommended to FM Aboul Gheit that the Egyptians reach out, in a firm but constructive tone, to the Syrians, to mitigate this risk. However, he said that Aboul Gheit had disagreed and returned his memo with a hand-written comment: "I disagree. We are not going to run to the Syrians now."

¶6. (C) MFA Senior Cabinet Advisor Hossam Zaki told us July 18 that, indeed, there is no GOE inclination to reach out to the Syrians in the near future. He assessed that the Euros mistakenly "opened the door" to the Syrians at the Paris summit, giving the SARG too much credit for political progress in Lebanon, and are further mistaken in their belief that Syria is in an advanced stage of divesting itself of its relationship with Iran. USG acceptance of the Israel-Syria talks, and U/S Burns' meeting with Iranian officials in Geneva, could also be misinterpreted by the Syrians as signals that they did not have to move to accommodate the moderate stance of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but rather to the contrary. Nevertheless, Zaki was adamant that the GOE would maintain its current distance from the SARG.

¶7. (C) Building on this conversation, Afifi told us July 20 that the Egyptians are not opposed to Western rapprochement with Syria in principle, but that there "must be a rationale for it." In his view, any overture to Syria should yield results on key regional goals, i.e. Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and/or Iran. He was not as worried as Neggary about the prospect of Egypt isolating itself with respect to Syria, reasoning that Egypt (and Saudi

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Arabia) are firmly positioned within the Arab fold and that Syria would not be able to simply ignore them, regardless of the circumstances.

¶8. (C) Comment: The Egyptian MFA is against reaching out to Damascus now. But, as these conversations illustrate, Egyptian anxiety about Syria persists. They are unsure what greater Western rapprochement with Syria would mean for them. Zaki, clearly on edge, told us July 18 that "this is how it always goes for the (Arab) moderates." The "GCC plus three" meeting to be held in Abu Dhabi July 21 could be a good opportunity to reassure the Egyptians.

SCOBET